

Dear Commissioners:

I would humbly submit to you that the Federal Communications Commission's proposal to relax media ownership rules will lead to dramatic consolidation of the two most important sources of news for much of the United States' citizens and residents. It is my belief that the FCC's proposal limits the amount of emphasis on local and meaningful issues that national and local media would cover, and further that it provides less protection for media mergers than our antitrust laws do for corporate mergers.

Your view on the subject should be influenced by greater analysis on the subject and with a nod toward the more than 18,000 views presented to the FCC, some in the limited public comment your agency has sponsored and even less than the media has covered. Key First Amendment principles should be enveloped in your decision not to support relaxing media ownership, and the FCC should not bend to any political agenda. It should serve the good and the will of the people, and for the benefit of the people.

Contrary to your view that the Federal Appeals court rulings say that the current media ownership restrictions lack sufficient legal basis, I would disagree. It is apparent that in the lack of exposure this major issue has received has less to do with the public's apathy or lack of interest, but more to do with the media's view of how your actions would affect their bottom line.

In the reports from several consumer's agencies (such as the Consumer's Union and Consumer Federation of America), I have found that the draft order ignores audience size, actual patterns of media use and the dramatic difference between entertainment and the dissemination of news and information. The CFA/CU analysis shows that mergers would be allowed in 140 concentrated local markets. In as many as 100 of these local markets, representing nearly half the national population, there is one dominant newspaper. Allowing a merger between a dominant newspaper and a large TV station would create a local news giant that threatens alternative news viewpoints. In these markets, one firm would have half of the total audience and employ half the total news employees.

The four major television networks get their profits by putting their nationally-oriented programming in front of the largest national audience possible, which maximizes advertising revenue. These companies therefore have no incentive to support or promote locally oriented programming that may be more interesting and more useful to a particular community at a particular point in time.

It is critical that these national companies not be allowed to be so large through ownership of too many local channels that they can dictate programming that does not meet the needs and tastes of the local community. Clearly, local broadcasters with no national profit-maximizing motives are better positioned to be responsive to their local communities.

The CFA/CU report points out that the FCC's mistake in opening markets to cross-ownership mergers is not limited to small rural areas. One-paper cities include Atlanta, Louisville, New Orleans, and San Antonio. In these localities the media giant would have a 90 percent or larger share of the newspaper circulation and a merger would also typically secure one-third of the TV audience. No second entity could come close to matching this media power. In typical two-newspaper markets (such as Buffalo, Las Vegas, Little Rock, and

Richmond) the dominant paper still has, on average, five times the circulation of the number two paper. A merged firm would have four-fifths of the newspaper market, and one-third of the TV market.

I agree that public policy should err in favor of more competition rather than less so communities can enjoy a greater diversity of viewpoints so critical to democratic dialogue and debate. We already are beginning to see this detrimental effect in the incredible homogenization of American radio, where two companies effectively control the bulk of programming in the country.

This broadcast ownership cap, one of six rules that your Commission will review tomorrow, is critical to the independence and diversity of our nation's media. The FCC should uphold these values and view, in support of the American people which your Commission serves, and not relax these rules. I trust that you have not lost sight of that simple truth.

Sincerely,

M. E. Sweatt, III